

**THE OWL OF MINERVA:  
REFLECTIONS ON THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF MARY MIDGLEY**

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Abstract: This paper offers a theologically-orientated examination of some core themes of the works of the philosopher Mary Midgley (1919–2018), identifying areas of possible theological exploration and development. Particular attention is paid to her critique of the reductionist strategies of writers such as Richard Dawkins, her development of the ‘mapping’ metaphor for engaging complex issues, and her emphasis on the critical role of philosophy. Although the paper offers some brief examples of theological issues which are illuminated by Midgley’s philosophical approach (such as soteriological mapping), the primary purpose of the paper is to highlight the theological hospitality which it offers.

At the time of her death, Mary Midgley was one of the most visible British public philosophers of her age, noted for her espousal of a wide range of causes, defying those who held that the essence of philosophical greatness lay in focused specialization, or in a disinclination to engage with a wider public.<sup>1</sup> Her criticism of technocratic academic

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<sup>1</sup> For a useful overview of her approach, see Gregory McElwain, *Mary Midgley: An Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019); Ian James Kidd and Liz McKinnell (eds.), *Science and the Self: Animals, Evolution, and Ethics: Essays in Honour of Mary Midgley* (New York: Routledge, 2016). Midgley’s

philosophy, preoccupied with the conventions of the philosophical guild rather than the question of the meaning of life,<sup>2</sup> struck a deep resonant chord with many of her readers. Others were drawn to her trenchant criticisms of the ‘mechanistic creed’ originating from the Enlightenment, which created a new mythology of progress in which the natural sciences were accorded special privilege in public discourse.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps Midgley’s willingness to engage multiple areas of human inquiry persuaded her of the complexity of the world, and the inadequacy of any one intellectual method to grasp or represent it adequately. In a penetrating early paper on Darwin, she affirmed the importance of disciplinary specificity, while at the same time insisting on interdisciplinary dialogue.

The unity of the world we study calls for free trade in information and in concepts between all the sciences. Autonomy cannot be isolation. Of course each discipline needs to be distinct and to use its own methods. But each also vitally needs to be open to suggestions from its neighbours.<sup>4</sup>

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autobiography, from which this article derives its title, should also be consulted: Mary Midgley, *The Owl of Minerva: A Memoir* (London: Routledge, 2005). Midgley was one of a group of four women philosophers to study at Oxford during the Second World War. For a brief account of the relation and very different career trajectories of Midgley, Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, and Iris Murdoch, see Benjamin J. P. Lipscombe, “‘Slipping out over the Wall:’ Midgley, Anscombe, Foot, and Murdoch,” in *Science and the Self*, pp. 207–23.

<sup>2</sup> Her criticisms of the analytic philosopher Colin McGinn illustrate this point well: Midgley, *The Owl of Minerva*, pp. x-xi.

<sup>3</sup> See especially Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 2004). For her final reflections on the ‘reductive, scientific, mechanistic, fantasy-ridden creed which still constantly distorts the world-view of our age’, see Mary Midgley, *What is Philosophy for?* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 189–200.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Midgley, ‘De-Dramatizing Darwin’, *The Monist* 67 (1984), pp. 200–15 (here p. 200).

This fundamental ‘impulse to rescue complexity from abstraction’, to use a nice phrase from her leading interpreter Ian James Kidd,<sup>5</sup> is found throughout her writings, and is perhaps seen at its best – and certainly at its most forceful – in her rejection of the notion of scientific privilege claimed by Richard Dawkins and others.<sup>6</sup> Yet her concern here is not primarily for the dangers of scientific over-reach, but for the intellectual impoverishment attending any attempt to restrict our knowledge and understanding of the world to that which results from a single disciplinary approach. ‘No one pattern of thought – not even in physics – is so “fundamental” that all others will eventually be reduced to it. Instead, for most important questions in human life, a number of different conceptual tool-boxes always have to be used together.’<sup>7</sup>

Yet while many have rightly identified Midgley’s importance for multiple areas of intellectual reflection, particularly philosophy and ethics,<sup>8</sup> no serious attempt has been made to offer even a brief exploration of her importance for religion in general, or Christian

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<sup>5</sup> Ian James Kidd, ‘Obituary: Mary Midgley.’ *Fortean Times* 375 (2019), p. 31. For my own encounter with Midgley, see Alister McGrath, *Through a Glass Darkly: Journeys through Science, Faith and Doubt* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2020), pp. 176–8.

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent account of this aspect of Midgley’s thought, see Ian James Kidd, ‘Doing Science an Injustice: Midgley on Scientism,’ in *Science and the Self*, pp. 151–67.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Midgley, ‘Dover Beach: Understanding the Pains of Bereavement’, *Philosophy* 81 (2006), pp. 209–30 (here p. 219).

<sup>8</sup> Her engagement with the place of animals in a Darwinian world is especially significant: See, for example, Nelson Rivera, *The Earth Is Our Home: Mary Midgley’s Critique and Reconstruction of Evolution and Its Meanings* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010); Gregory S. McElwain, ‘The Mixed Community,’ in *Science and the Self*, pp. 41–51.

theology in particular.<sup>9</sup> Midgley was, of course, a humanist – but not in the sense of someone who was anti-religious, or dismissive of the cultural and intellectual significance of religious belief. Midgley’s humanism celebrates human intellectual and cultural accomplishments as a whole, arguing that in order to ‘pay comprehensive tribute to the achievements of our species,’ proper attention has to be paid to ‘the religious thinking that has been so central to our species-life.’<sup>10</sup> Midgley herself considered theology an important intellectual discipline; she clearly has much to contribute to its agendas, not least through her appreciation of the limits placed on human knowledge, and the danger of superficial engagements with both human beings and the world.

This paper sets out to map the contours of Midgley’s philosophy, highlighting those aspects which might be of especial interest to theologians, and briefly making some explicit connections with theological concerns. My task here is thus primarily to offer a reliable critical account of some theologically significant themes in Midgley’s works, and point to how these might be developed further. Limits on space mean that my primary task is the elucidation and analysis of Midgley, rather than her theological application. It is, however, hoped that this theologically-orientated analysis of her approach may be useful to others recognizing her potential as a theological conversation partner.

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<sup>9</sup> McElwain touches on this subject, offering some comments on the notion of religion without engaging specifically theological issues: see, for example, McElwain, *Mary Midgley*, pp. 136–8.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Midgley, ‘Against Humanism’, *New Humanist*, 25 October 2010. Midgley diverges here from Bernard Williams, who considers religion to be malignant, so that its status as a human production raises awkward questions about human morality and rationality. See Bernard Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 80: ‘Humanism – in the contemporary sense of a secularist and anti-religious movement – seems seldom to have faced fully a very immediate consequence of its own views; that this terrible thing, religion, is a *human* creation.’

Perhaps the most appropriate starting point for this exploration of Midgley's significance for theology is her use of the metaphor of 'maps' to capture the many aspects of reality, and resist inadequate reductionist accounts of its complexity.

## ON MAPPING A COMPLEX WORLD

Midgley's appeal to the mapping of reality has two elements of theological significance – her demand that we face up to the fact that the many levels and aspects of our world can never be completely captured by any single methodology; and her eloquent exploration of how such maps may be constructed and used. Picking up on the physicist John Ziman's comparison of scientific theories to maps,<sup>11</sup> Midgley protests against those who think they can reduce the 'painful chaos' of reality to certain, objective, and idealized theoretical forms.

[Ziman developed the] metaphor of knowledge as the use of maps – not of one map but of a collection of maps, all of them incomplete, which together gradually shape our understanding of a new piece of country. By bringing those maps together and constantly improving them (he said), in time we build up a composite picture which brings us closer and closer to what the outside world is actually telling us.<sup>12</sup>

It is like reducing the sprawling physical and cultural expanse of the City of London to the neat conceptual delineations of a map of the London Underground. While Midgley is aware

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<sup>11</sup> John Ziman, *Reliable Knowledge: An Exploration of the Grounds for Belief in Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 82–5.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Midgley, 'Mapping Science: In Memory of John Ziman', *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 30 (2005), pp. 195–7.

of a legitimate use of reductionist strategies in the natural sciences, she resists any attempt to reduce reality to what any single research method can disclose.<sup>13</sup>

For Midgley, our research methods must be adapted to cope with the world that we are attempting to understand. Its complexity is such that any single research method or ‘way of thinking’ will be inadequate to do justice to the reality under consideration. Her point is fair, and would be endorsed by most natural scientists. The natural sciences are characterized by a direct engagement with the natural world, the accumulation of evidence, and critical reflection on how that evidence may best be interpreted. There is no single ‘Scientific Method’; rather there is a range of scientific methods which are developed, calibrated and deployed in the light of specific research challenges and tasks. Scholarly studies of the history and practice of science point to a plurality of scientific *methods*, each adapted and developed in the light of a specific scientific discipline’s investigative aims and objects of enquiry. Werner Heisenberg, in teasing out the implications of the Copenhagen approach to quantum theory, remarked that ‘what we observe is not nature itself, but nature as it is disclosed by our methods of investigation.’<sup>14</sup> Even if we conceive nature as a unitary entity, Heisenberg’s line of thought leads us to the conclusion that a multiplicity of research methods leads to a corresponding plurality of perspectives or insights, which thus require to be integrated or colligated to achieve a deeper understanding of our natural world.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See especially Mary Midgley, ‘Reductive Megalomania’, in John Cornwell (ed.), *Nature’s Imagination: The Frontiers of Scientific Vision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 133–47.

<sup>14</sup> Werner Heisenberg, *Physik und Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Hirzel, 2007), p. 85.

<sup>15</sup> For my own reflections on this point, see Alister E. McGrath, *The Territories of Human Reason: Science and Theology in an Age of Multiple Rationalities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Midgley here adopts an informed approach which would command wide assent across the natural sciences. For example, the biologist Steven Rose holds that while the natural sciences explore a world that represents an ‘ontological unity,’ they must adopt ‘an epistemological pluralism’ in investigating it.<sup>16</sup> Different research tasks thus demand different tool-boxes, each adapted to the task in question. They yield a plurality of different (though not for that reason inconsistent) outcomes. Midgley is clear that we must use different methods to attain a meaningful understanding of our world. But how do we weave these outcomes into a single whole? Are we doomed to a mere pluralism – the recognition of multiple accounts of the world – or is there some plausible means of achieving some degree of unification or consilience of these accounts?<sup>17</sup> At this point, Midgley makes an important concession: there is ‘no single law showing us how we have to combine them.’<sup>18</sup> We have to explore options until we find one that seems to work well. She summed up this dilemma well in her final book, *What is Philosophy for?*

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<sup>16</sup> Steven Rose, ‘The Biology of the Future and the Future of Biology,’ in John Cornwall (ed.), *Explanations: Styles of Explanation in Science*, edited by Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 125–42 (here pp. 128–9).

A similar view is taken by the philosopher of science John Dupré, who remarks that ‘the only way of a deeper understanding of ourselves is through radical epistemological pluralism.’ John Dupré, ‘The Lure of the Simplistic’, *Philosophy of Science* 69 (2002), pp. S284–93 (here p. S293).

<sup>17</sup> For one account of how such unification might be achieved, see Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Vintage, 1999). For an analysis of Wilson’s intellectual ‘desire to produce order out of chaos,’ and his less laudable colonialist aspirations to ‘capture the moral realm and render it under scientific and material control,’ see Ullica Segerstrale, ‘Wilson and the Unification of Science’, *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1093 (2006), pp. 46–73.

<sup>18</sup> Midgley, ‘Dover Beach’, p. 219. For reflections on this issue of combining multiple perspectives or ‘maps’, see McGrath, *Territories of Human Reason*, pp. 203–26.

On the one hand, I want to emphasize that there really *is* only one world, but also – on the other – that this world is so complex, so various that we need dozens of distinct thought-patterns to understand it. We can't reduce all these ways of thinking to any single model. Instead, we have to use all out philosophical tools to bring these distinct kinds of thought together.<sup>19</sup>

Yet while Midgley failed to find a fundamental principle of coordination or unification, she nevertheless formulated a plausible visible framework for holding together a plurality of partial insights from different disciplines – the use of multiple maps.<sup>20</sup> In offering a critical assessment of Midgley's approach, it is appropriate to begin by considering why human beings find maps to be cognitively plausible ways of representing or holding together complex realities in the first place.<sup>21</sup> As Midgley herself appreciates, the way in which human beings conceive the world is deeply shaped by the fact that we are physically embodied and culturally embedded.<sup>22</sup> Our experience of the world shapes the metaphors we use to try and

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<sup>19</sup> Midgley, *What is Philosophy for?*, p. 193.

<sup>20</sup> For a succinct account see Mary Midgley, 'Pluralism: The Many Maps Model', *Philosophy Now* 35 (2002), pp. 10–11; for a fuller discussion, see Mary Midgley, *Science and Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 170–213.

<sup>21</sup> For an important exploration of this theme, see Sara I. Fabrikant and André Skupin, 'Cognitively Plausible Information Visualization,' in Jason Dykes, Alan M. MacEachren and Menno-Jan Kraak (eds.), *Exploring Geovisualization* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2005), pp. 667–90. Fabrikant and Skupin suggest that this 'plausibility' arises through the intuitive correlation of geographic space and internal human visualization capabilities.

<sup>22</sup> On this general issue, see Angela K. Leung, Lin Qiu, Laysee Ong, and Kim-Pong Tam, 'Embodied Cultural Cognition: Situating the Study of Embodied Cognition in Socio-Cultural Contexts', *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 5 (2011), pp. 591–608; Bradford Z. Mahon and Alfonso Caramazza, 'A Critical Look at the Embodied Cognition Hypothesis and a New Proposal for Grounding Conceptual Content', *Journal of Physiology-Paris* 102 (2008), pp. 59–70. For specifically theological aspects of physical embodiment, see John



apprehend its deeper structures. In their influential study of how we use metaphors, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson remarked that ‘most of our fundamental concepts are organized in terms of one or more spatialization metaphors.’<sup>23</sup> This verdict, which can be extended by appealing to the notion of ‘conceptual mapping,’<sup>24</sup> is amply justified in the increased use of mapping techniques to allow the visualization of complex domains of knowledge, enabling their distinct natures to be respected while at the same time identifying ways in which they may be correlated.<sup>25</sup> This spatial metaphor is now widely used to explore the complex intellectual and historical issues, such as the ‘geography of human reason,’<sup>26</sup> which recognizes that the generation and reception of ideas is significantly shaped by the cultural context in which they are produced and evaluated.<sup>27</sup> Although our concern here is with

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Sanders, *Theology in the Flesh: How Embodiment and Culture Shape the Way We Think about Truth, Morality, and God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> George Lakoff, and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 17.

<sup>24</sup> As noted by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, ‘Rethinking Metaphor,’ in Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr. (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 53–66.

<sup>25</sup> For illustration of such forms of intellectual spatialization, see Helen Couclelis, ‘Worlds of Information: The Geographic Metaphor in the Visualization of Complex Information’, *Cartography and Geographic Information Systems* 25 (1998), pp. 209–20; Richard M. Shiffrin and Katy Börner, ‘Mapping Knowledge Domains’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 101 (2004), pp. 5183–5; André Skupin and Sara Irina Fabrikant, ‘Spatialization Methods: A Cartographic Research Agenda for Non-Geographic Information Visualization’, *Cartography and Geographic Information Systems* 30 (2013), pp. 99–119.

<sup>26</sup> For this phrase, see Nicolaas A. Rupke, ‘A Geography of Enlightenment: The Critical Reception of Alexander von Humboldt’s Mexico Work’, in Charles W. J. Withers and David N. Livingstone (eds.), *Geography and Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 319–39, especially p. 336.

<sup>27</sup> See David N. Livingstone, ‘Science, Text, and Space: Thoughts on the Geography of Reading’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35 (2005), pp. 391–401; Charles W. J. Withers, *Placing the*

Midgley's specific approach, it is important to set this against a wider context of discussion, which both affirms its broad plausibility, and points to ways in which her approach might be developed.

Midgley suggested that we use multiple maps, each of which is incomplete in itself, in our attempts to make as much sense as we can of our world, and live meaningfully within it.<sup>28</sup>

Consider an atlas, which provides us with many maps of a region – for example, North America or Europe. But why do we need multiple maps of such landscapes in the first place? Midgley, in dealing with this objection, points out that different maps provide different information about the same reality. We need multiple mappings of reality because each such mapping is incomplete, and focusses on some specific question that is being asked.

No map shows everything. Each map concentrates on answering a particular set of questions. Each map 'explains' the whole only in the sense of answering certain given questions about it – not others. Each set of questions arises out of its own particular background in life – out of its own specific set of problems, and needs answers relevant to those problems.<sup>29</sup>

A physical map of Europe shows us the features of its landscapes. A political map shows the borders of its nation states. The first might be useful to a tourist interested in mountain scenes, the second to a refugee seeking asylum. Midgley's point is that there is only 'one

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*Enlightenment: Thinking Geographically about the Age of Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 136–48; McGrath, *Territories of Human Reason*, pp. 19–92.

<sup>28</sup> Midgley, *Science and Poetry*, pp. 170–213.

<sup>29</sup> Midgley, 'Pluralism: The Many Maps Model', p. 11.

world, but a big one.<sup>30</sup> It needs many maps to do justice to its vast scope and range, and to the multiple interests and concerns of its inhabitants.

Each map makes sense of the whole landscape only by answering certain questions about it – and not others. To get an overall view of this complex reality, we refuse to depend solely on any single map, which is necessarily incomplete in itself. Instead, we try to find some way of bringing such maps together, so that their information can be harvested and used. A physical map of North America does not make a political map of that same region irrelevant, in that we need to map both physical and social realities. Each map answers different questions – and each of those questions is important to different groups of users. And perhaps most importantly, these maps can be laid over each other, so to speak, so that they cumulatively yield more information than they can individually.

The metaphor of mapping can easily be applied to multiple areas of human reflection,<sup>31</sup> and is especially valuable in enabling the visualization of the manner in which complex theories are able to correlate observations and simpler theories.<sup>32</sup> As the use of conceptual maps in Christology and soteriology makes clear, this also helpful theologically. Early Christian theologians were confronted by the need to locate Jesus Christ adequately on a map of the

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<sup>30</sup> I here allude to the title of the paper in which she most fully developed this point: Mary Midgley, ‘One World but a Big One’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 3 (1996), pp. 500–14.

<sup>31</sup> For example, Ronald Giere has noted how scientific theories can be considered to function as maps in certain respects: Ronald N. Giere, *Scientific Perspectivism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 72–8.

<sup>32</sup> Kurt Gray, ‘How to Map Theory: Reliable Methods Are Fruitless without Rigorous Theory’, *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 12 (2017), pp. 731–41.

conceptual territories of humanity and divinity,<sup>33</sup> as it became increasingly evident that the conceptual categories inherited from both Judaism and Hellenistic philosophy were inadequate for this task.<sup>34</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria developed a Christological map which allowed the multiple elements of Christ's identity to be positioned coherently,<sup>35</sup> offering an analysis which parallels that of Midgley at points. However, it is in the related field of soteriology that the value of Midgley's approach becomes particularly clear.

Traditional scholarly accounts of the meaning of the death and resurrection of Christ have tended to focus on the categories of motifs, models, and metaphors.<sup>36</sup> These include images drawn from – to mention only a few representative examples – the cultic world of the Old

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<sup>33</sup> For some early attempts, see Peter Ben-Smit, 'The End of Early Christian Adoptionism? A Note on the Invention of Adoptionism, Its Sources, and Its Current Demise', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 76 (2015), pp. 177–99; Michael J. Kok, 'Classifying Cerinthus's Christology', *Journal of Early Christian History* 9 (2019), pp. 30–48.

<sup>34</sup> For an excellent account of the process of 'Christological mapping' in Luke's gospel, see Gregory R. Lanier, *Old Testament Conceptual Metaphors and the Christology of Luke's Gospel* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), especially pp. 48–69. For this process in early Christian theology, culminating in the Council of Nicaea, see the influential account of Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 11–84.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas G. Weinandy, *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 81–100.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, H. E. W. Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption: A Study of the Development of Doctrine during the First Five Centuries* (London: Mowbray, 1952); Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality, and the Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989); D. Francois Tolmie, 'Salvation as Redemption: The Use of "Redemption" Metaphors in Pauline Literature', in J. G. Van der Watt (ed.), *Salvation in the New Testament: Perspectives on Soteriology* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 247–69; Robin Ryan, *Jesus and Salvation: Soundings in the Christian Tradition and Contemporary Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015).

Testament (sacrifice), Roman family law (adoption), and personal relationships (reconciliation).<sup>37</sup> Yet the use of these categories leaves it unclear how they are to be integrated. Are these to be understood as exclusive, so that we are obliged to choose between them? If they are understood to be complementary, we have to consider how they may be woven together. Or are they to be seen simply as a *bricolage* – a creative association or imaginative entangling of individual theoretical components?<sup>38</sup> Midgley’s approach allows the distinct identity of these individual maps to be valued and appreciated, while at the same time offering a visual model of how they may be held together, and used collaboratively to disclose a richer whole.

Recent scholarship in the field of Pauline studies has noted the importance of ‘mapping Paul’s soteriological metaphors.’<sup>39</sup> A cultic soteriological map locates Christ’s death within the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, emphasizing his continuity with the cult, while at the same time proclaiming the end of its validity.<sup>40</sup> The conceptual map offered by the notion of ‘adoption’ – which, given its culturally-specific background in Roman family law, Paul deploys only in those of his letters with an intended Roman readership – stresses the new relational and legal location of believers within the community of the church. This allows the

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<sup>37</sup> Richard J. Clifford and Khaled Anatolios, ‘Christian Salvation: Biblical and Theological Perspectives’, *Theological Studies* 66 (2005), pp. 739–69.

<sup>38</sup> For the creative and cognitive aspects of this metaphor, see Christopher Johnson, ‘Bricoleur and Bricolage: From Metaphor to Universal Concept’, *Paragraph* 35 (2012), pp. 355–72.

<sup>39</sup> Trevor J. Burke, ‘Adopted as Sons: The Missing Piece in Pauline Soteriology’, in Stanley E. Porter (ed.), *Paul as Jew, Greek and Roman* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 259–87, especially 260–3.

<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Stephen Finlan, ‘Sacrificial Images in the New Testament’, *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok*, 78 (2013), pp. 57–86.

colligation of a series of soteriological, relational and eschatological elements of the Christian life within this single map.<sup>41</sup> Each of these maps locates the death and resurrection of Christ within a certain context, offering its own distinct perspective, while making no claims to ultimacy or exclusivity. Critically, each can be laid over one another, yielding a rich layer of interpretative detail concerning this single historical event, which is capable of being mapped theologically in different manners.<sup>42</sup>

Each of these individual maps, as Midgley points out, has an intended user – someone who requires certain information, or who needs to make certain connections. Bringing and holding together a series of such maps enriches the theoretical depth of understanding of this event, without reducing it to one single mode of representation. The point to appreciate is that Midgley’s idea of ‘multiple maps’ is a representational strategy that is entirely consonant with her anti-reductionist agenda, demanding that we develop tools that allow us to capture and safeguard the complexity of our world. This strategy is theologically significant and productive, and leads us to consider a further aspect of Midgley’s philosophical trajectory which is of obvious theological significance – her critique of the scientism of the evolutionary biologist and populist atheist Richard Dawkins.

## AGAINST REDUCTIONISM: MIDGLEY’S CRITIQUE OF RICHARD DAWKINS

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<sup>41</sup> A point highlighted by Trevor J. Burke, *Adopted into God’s Family: Exploring a Pauline Metaphor* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2006), pp. 72–151.

<sup>42</sup> There is a kinship between Midgley’s approach and perspectivalism – as seen, for example, in Alexander Rueger, ‘Perspectival Models and Theory Unification’, *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 56 (2005), pp. 579–54. Midgley’s approach diverges from this, however, in its emphasis on representational issues, its explicitly anti-reductionist agenda, and its recognition of the distinct agendas and interests of intended users of individual maps.

Richard Dawkins was propelled to fame by his first book, *The Selfish Gene* (1976). It was a remarkable work of popular science, deftly summarizing some leading themes of the dominant schools of evolutionary biology, and using accessible language and imagery to open up some major questions about human nature and freedom.<sup>43</sup> For some, its appeal lay in its resonances with the cultural emphases of the late 1970s; for others, it lay simply in its clarity and elegance of exposition – and, of course, its arresting title. In choosing his title *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins aimed to tell the truth, as he saw it, about the implications of evolutionary theory for an understanding of human nature.<sup>44</sup>

The argument of this book is that we, and all other animals, are machines created by our genes. ... I shall argue that a predominant quality to be expected in a successful gene is ruthless selfishness. This gene selfishness will usually give rise to selfishness in individual behaviour.

Some, however, wondered how a gene could really be said to be ‘selfish’? Surely this represented an improper projection of human motivations upon an impersonal entity? Dawkins himself was aware of this concern, and went to some trouble to defend this idea against possible misunderstandings and criticisms. Genes, Dawkins argued, behave *as if* they are selfish, whatever implications this may be understood to have.

We must not think of genes as conscious, purposeful agents. Blind natural selection, however, makes them behave rather as if they were purposeful, and it has been convenient, as a form of shorthand, to refer to genes in the language of purpose.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> For the background to this work, and general reflections on its influence, see Alister E. McGrath, *Dawkins’ God: From the Selfish Gene to the God Delusion* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), pp. 32–56.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 9–10.

<sup>45</sup> Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, p. 196.

Genes do not have subjective motives; yet it is heuristically helpful to think of them as acting in this way.<sup>46</sup>

In 1979, Midgley entered into this discussion, challenging what she considered to be a sloppy use of analogical reasoning. ‘Genes cannot be selfish or unselfish, any more than atoms can be jealous.’<sup>47</sup> The attribution of ‘selfishness’ to genes was an improper consequence of anthropomorphic thinking which attributed human qualities to genes. Dawkins vigorously rejected these criticisms,<sup>48</sup> in my view with some justification.

Midgley then changed tack, refocusing on the strongly reductionist tendencies of Dawkins’s thought, above all his argument that science alone offered epistemic clarity and certainty. For Midgley, this exaggerated view of the competence of the natural sciences distorted the scientific enterprise itself, while failing to appreciate the distinct contribution of philosophy and the humanities.<sup>49</sup> The term ‘scientism’ is now widely used to refer to such attempts by over-ambitious scientists to colonize other areas of discourse by treating the natural sciences as the ‘ultimate standard and arbiter of all interesting questions.’<sup>50</sup> Here, Midgely scored some significant successes, gaining a reputation as one of the most plausible and accessible

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<sup>46</sup> Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, p. 88.

<sup>47</sup> Mary Midgley, ‘Gene-Juggling’, *Philosophy* 54 (1979), pp. 439–58.

<sup>48</sup> Richard Dawkins, ‘In Defence of Selfish Genes’, *Philosophy* 56 (1981), pp. 556–73.

<sup>49</sup> For the best study of Midgley’s critique of Dawkins on this point, see Kidd, ‘Doing Science an Injustice.’

<sup>50</sup> Massimo Pigliucci, ‘New Atheism and the Scientistic Turn in the Atheism Movement’, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 37 (2013), pp. 142–53 (here p. 144). For further comment on ‘scientism,’ see Richard N. Williams and Daniel N. Robinson, eds. *Scientism: The New Orthodoxy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Ian James Kidd, ‘Receptivity to Mystery: Cultivation, Loss, and Scientism’, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4 (2012), pp. 51–68.



critics of philosophically untutored scientists who sought to extend their disciplinary reach and cultural influence.

Midgley's approach rested primarily on her core conviction of the need for multiple research methods, maps, and tool-boxes to deal with the complexities of the world. Where most see science as part of a continuous spectrum of human knowledge, scientism regards scientific knowledge as the only form of valid knowledge.<sup>51</sup> As Midgley remarked, 'scientism's mistake does not lie in over-praising one form of [knowledge], but in cutting that form off from the rest of thought, in treating it as a victor who has put all the rest out of business.'<sup>52</sup> For Midgley, the natural sciences appeal to, if they do not rest upon, certain principles that are not themselves the outcome of the sciences. Science cannot cut itself off from other forms of knowledge; they are entangled.

Science cannot stand alone. We cannot believe its propositions without first believing in a great many other startling things, such as the existence of the external world, the reliability of our senses, memory and informants, and the validity of knowledge. If we do believe in these things, we already have a world far wider than that of science.<sup>53</sup>

Midgley's approach affirms and defends the existence of a proper and necessary conceptual space for the humanities, including philosophy and theology. She does this in two complementary ways. First, she insists upon the recognition of multiple research methods and

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<sup>51</sup> Midgley, *What is Philosophy for?*, pp. 86–95. Note especially her criticism of Laurence Krauss's attempted elimination of philosophy on 'scientific' grounds.

<sup>52</sup> Mary Midgley, *Are You an Illusion?* (Durham: Acumen, 2014), p. 5.

<sup>53</sup> Mary Midgley, *Science as Salvation: A Modern Myth and Its Meaning* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 108.

For elaboration of similar views, see Jeroen de Ridder, Rik Peels, and René van Woudenberg (eds.), *Scientism: Prospects and Problems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

ways of thinking, in order to engage and capture the complexity of our world. Second, she asserts that there are certain questions that are of fundamental importance to human beings which science is, through its own characteristic methods, unable to answer.<sup>54</sup> If only a scientific perspective on reality is allowed to become normative, the outcome is inevitably a ‘bizarrely restrictive’ view of meaning.<sup>55</sup> This naturally leads us to consider Midgley’s views on the role of philosophy, and how these might be extended to deal with theological issues.

#### PLUMBING AND PROBLEM SOLVING: THE TASKS OF PHILOSOPHY

This article is entitled ‘The Owl of Minerva’, drawing on the title of Midgley’s memoir of her life and work, which is itself an allusion to an image used by Hegel. This image helpfully highlights a theme of considerable theological importance which recurs throughout Midgley’s writings. In a brief reflection on ‘Light, Darkness, and Owls’,<sup>56</sup> Midgley points out that ‘wisdom, and therefore philosophy, comes into its own when things become dark and difficult rather than when they are clear and straightforward.’

One of Midgley’s concerns about the Enlightenment was its emphasis on focussing only on ‘what is already clear,’ encouraging an unhelpful tendency to regard ‘physical science’ as the ‘ideal for all enquiries.’ Yet the human situation demands engagement with questions that often seem to be shrouded in half-light, so that while *simple* answers are inadequate, answers nevertheless remain necessary. Although Midgley rarely refers specifically to the notion of

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<sup>54</sup> Such as the field of morals: see McElwain, *Mary Midgley: An Introduction*, pp. 43–64.

<sup>55</sup> Mary Midgley, *Wisdom, Information, and Wonder: What Is Knowledge For?* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 199. Midgley considers the distinction between facts and values, so often blurred, to reflect the confusions arising from scientism.

<sup>56</sup> Midgley, *The Owl of Minerva*, pp. x–xii.

‘mystery’, the concept is clearly present in her later writings, if not necessarily described using this term. There are some questions that our minds are not adapted to resolve, and we have to learn to live with this, and find ways of coping with it, rather than fall victim to some aversion to ‘exploring the darkness.’<sup>57</sup>

In her final book *What Is Philosophy For?*, published a month before her death, Midgley emphasized that the enterprise of philosophy is not static, but is undertaken in the midst of a complex and changing world, partly to engage the questions that are thrown up by a particular moment or situation. As a result, our philosophies can never be considered definitive or final; they are best seen as interim responses to a particular historically situated concern.

Philosophizing, in fact, is not a matter of solving one fixed set of puzzles. Instead, it involves finding the many particular ways of thinking that will be the most helpful as we try to explore this constantly changing world. Because the world – including human life – does constantly change, philosophical thoughts are never final. Their aim is always to help us through the present difficulty.<sup>58</sup>

Midgley’s vision of philosophy, as set out in this work, concerns the forging of defensible and illuminating connections between different areas of our lives and thought in order to

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<sup>57</sup> Midgley, *The Owl of Minerva*, p. x. See also her discussion of this theme at it is found in Chomsky: Midgley, *What Is Philosophy For?*, p. 33. For other representative references to the notion, see Midgley, *Science as Salvation*, pp. 75–6. In some of her earlier writings, the notion of a religious ‘mystery’ is treated as ‘paralytic to thought.’ See, for example, Mary Midgley, ‘The Vulnerable World and Its Claims on Us’, *The Georgia Review* 39 (1985), pp. 739–54, especially p. 744.

<sup>58</sup> Mary Midgley, *What Is Philosophy For?*, p. 6.

create a ‘coherent world picture.’<sup>59</sup> Philosophy is thus ‘always looking for helpful connections – new patterns of thinking and living that explain the ways in which we think and live now.’<sup>60</sup>

Midgley’s emphasis on the philosophical discernment of connections and their assimilation or colligation to yield a grander vision of reality has a long history, and it is important to be reminded of this. Yet her constructive and synthetic view of philosophy needs to be set alongside its more critical function. Philosophy is ‘something we are all doing all the time, a continuous, necessary background activity which is likely to go badly if we don’t attend to it.’<sup>61</sup> Whether fairly or not, Midgley’s discussion of the critical role of philosophy is generally discussed in terms of her 1992 essay ‘Philosophical Plumbing.’<sup>62</sup> While some of her critics believe this quotidian imagery demeans the enterprise of philosophy, others might reasonably point out that it emphasizes its practical necessity.

So what does Midgley mean by this image? In ‘Philosophical Plumbing’, Midgley challenges the idea that philosophy is ‘gratuitous,’ that it is ‘something grand and exalted, which people could quite easily live without’, and whose pursuit constitutes some form of intellectual

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<sup>59</sup> Midgley does not take this to mean that a philosophical ‘theory of everything’ is possible; like William James, she rather accepted an empirical pluralism, and sought to find plausible ways of correlating its various elements. See especially the comments in Midgley, *The Owl of Minerva*, p. 65.

<sup>60</sup> Midgley, *What Is Philosophy For?*, p. 72.

<sup>61</sup> Midgley, *What Is Philosophy For?*, p. 81.

<sup>62</sup> Mary Midgley, ‘Philosophical Plumbing’, in A. Phillips Griffiths (ed.), *The Impulse to Philosophise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 139–51. For comment, see McElwain, *Mary Midgley*, pp. 1–4.

virtue.<sup>63</sup> Midgley's point is that, not least because we are physically embodied and culturally embedded, there is a need for constant scrutiny of our rational conventions and vigilance over the outcomes to which they lead. Drawing on the example of Socrates, whose abstract reflections arose from and were intended to engage the confusions of politics and social justice, Midgley declares that the 'noble impulse to philosophise' is not a hobby or luxury, to be pursued in the splendid isolation of ivory towers, but represents a necessary and principled interrogation of our embodied and embedded reasoning processes, in case they lead us astray. 'We exist in continual conflict because our natural impulses do not form a clear, coherent system. And the cultures by which we try to make sense of those impulses often work very badly.'<sup>64</sup>

It has not been sufficiently noted how Midgley here makes connections with human evolutionary history, insisting that we recognize that our thinking is affected by our physical embodiment as animals. Human beings are located on a continuous spectrum of rationality, so that our inquiries about rationality should not be framed in terms of what distinguishes us *from* animals, but rather what distinguishes us *among* animals.<sup>65</sup> The idea of a 'species-

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<sup>63</sup> Midgley, 'Philosophical Plumbing', p. 149. This essay is reprinted, along with much other relevant material, in Mary Midgley, *Utopias, Dolphins and Computers: Problems of Philosophical Plumbing* (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>64</sup> Midgley, 'Philosophical Plumbing', p. 150.

<sup>65</sup> Mary Midgley, *The Ethical Primate: Humans, Freedom, and Morality* (London: Routledge, 1994), especially pp. 23–4; Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*. Rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 2002).

Midgley's emphasis on the philosophical significance of the 'fuzzy boundaries' between animals and humans has been the subject of much discussion. See, for example, McElwain, *Mary Midgley*, pp. 22–8; 74–80. There is no space to develop this point, but this clearly raises a host of questions relating to human rationality and morality: see, for example, Darcia Narváez, *Neurobiology and the Development of Human Morality: Evolution*,

barrier' between humans and animals is perhaps more porous and flimsy than some are prepared to admit.<sup>66</sup> While this insight is determinative of certain aspects of Midgley's thought, it is particularly important for this discussion in that it highlights the limiting conditions under which human beings think, in that our physical natures are shaped to some indeterminate extent by our evolutionary past. '*We think as whole people*, not as disembodied minds, not as computers.'<sup>67</sup> We have to confront the 'messiness' of our rational processes, which are affected in potentially hidden and unquantifiable manners by our evolutionary history and our cultural location. Philosophy is precisely the form of critical self-interrogation which can help us avoid making mistakes which originate from our history and culture, challenging our epistemic complacency.

So how do we cope with the limits placed upon us on account of our physical embodiment and cultural embeddedness? One option is that favoured by transhumanist writers such as Nick Bostrom, who argue it is possible and desirable to liberate human rational processes

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*Culture, and Wisdom* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014); Agustín Fuentes and Celia Deane-Drummond, 'Human Being and Becoming: Situating Theological Anthropology in Interspecies Relationships in an Evolutionary Context', *Philosophy, Theology and the Sciences* 1 (2014), pp. 251–75.

<sup>66</sup> Mary Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1984), pp. 112–24.

<sup>67</sup> Midgley, 'Philosophical Plumbing,' p. 149. See further the discussion of embodied cognition in George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 37: 'The claim that the mind is embodied is, therefore, far more than the simple-minded claim that the body is needed if we are to think. ... Our claim is, rather, that the very properties of concepts are created as a result of the way the brain and body are structured and the way they function in interpersonal relation and in the physical world.'

from such limitations through the development of artificial intelligence.<sup>68</sup> Midgley represents an alternative approach, which acknowledges the limiting conditions under which human reasoning operates. One of Midgley's more important later anxieties was that the disinterested search for truth seems to have descended into a 'cult of impersonality.'<sup>69</sup> Midgley does not, in my view, solve the problems just noted; she nevertheless invites us to acknowledge and confront them, learning how they might lead to skewed and unreliable rational outcomes, and inviting us to explore ways of working with these limitations in the real world we presently inhabit. From a theological perspective, of course, it might be added that the power and poignancy of the core Christian concept of incarnation is that God chose to enter the world in a physically embodied and culturally embedded form.<sup>70</sup>

Midgley's reflections on the need to learn to live with uncertainty offer a helpful stimulus for Christian theology. In my view, one of the finest sections of her final book deals with the flawed human search tendency to search for oracular pronouncements that promise certainty.<sup>71</sup> Although this flaw lies partly in the deficiencies of human nature, Midgley locates it particularly in the emergence of scientism, which presented the natural sciences as the only reliable oracles of modernity, to be revered as the sole 'metaphysical source of all

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<sup>68</sup> Nick Bostrom, 'Letter from Utopia', *Studies in Ethics, Law, and Technology* 2 (2008), pp. 1–7. On the demand to limit intelligence from physical embodiment, see Ray Kurzweil, *How to Create a Mind: The Secret of Human Thought Revealed* (London: Duckworth Overlook, 2013). For a theological assessment, see Michael S. Burdett, 'Personhood and Creation in an Age of Robots and AI: Can We Say "You" to Artifacts?', *Zygon* 55 (2020), pp. 347–60.

<sup>69</sup> Midgley, *What is Philosophy for?*, pp. 159–67.

<sup>70</sup> For a provocative exploration of this point, see Ola Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies: Incarnation, the Gaze, and Embodiment in Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016).

<sup>71</sup> Midgley, *What is Philosophy for?*, pp. 125–6.

our knowledge'. This 'scientistic outlook' has secured significant social traction through its 'myths, fables, images, fantasies, dreams and carefully constructed world-pictures'.<sup>72</sup> What John Dupré so tellingly describes as the 'lure of the simplistic'<sup>73</sup> continues to haunt and stunt serious discussion of our complex world, encouraging and fuelling the human aversion to uncertainty on the one hand, and spawning gross oversimplifications of complex issues on the other.

This dilemma has long been known to Christian theologians and philosophers, whose carefully calibrated concepts of 'faith' attempt to articulate the notion of a warranted belief that cannot be proved to be true – but which may be relied upon, cognitively and existentially, as we journey through life.<sup>74</sup> Midgley does not – why should she? – engage such theological themes as John of the Cross's 'Dark Night of the Soul', or Martin Luther's 'theology of the cross', both of which face up to the challenge of coping with uncertainty as we travel through a half-lit world.<sup>75</sup> Such a notion of faith represents a principled refusal to find epistemic solace in the false certainties of the oracles of oversimplification, and instead to face up to the ambiguities of a complex and puzzling world, which does not disclose its

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<sup>72</sup> Midgley, *What is Philosophy for?*, p. 192. This topic is more fully discussed in Midgley, *The Myths We Live By*, and Midgley, *Science as Salvation*.

<sup>73</sup> Dupré, 'Lure of the Simplistic.'

<sup>74</sup> See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Graham Ward, *Unbelievable: Why We Believe and Why We Don't* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014); Lydia Schumacher, *Rationality as Virtue: Towards a Theological Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>75</sup> For an insightful engagement with both, see the classic study of Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2014).



nature and significance in the clear and simple manner that the Enlightenment encouraged us to expect.

Nevertheless, we are still able to infer, intuit, or even have disclosed to us, what William James described as a ‘relation-building matrix’ (what Christian writers might refer to as a theological worldview)<sup>76</sup> which makes sense of our experience and observations, allowing us to discern a unity beneath or beyond the diversity of our world – but not to *prove* that such a unity exists.<sup>77</sup> Such a ‘matrix’ gives rise to a set of unprovable yet significant moral beliefs, within which believers can exist and flourish. James clearly considered that belief in the existence of God is cognitively and existentially significant, evident in its motivating believers to enact their moral commitments with a psychological seriousness and commitment that might not be available to those who have not found such a ‘matrix’ of meaning.<sup>78</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Midgley championed philosophical resistance to the constriction of our mental visions of reality, stressing that the quality of our thinking ought to be as deep and complex as the world that we hope to understand. Where some acquiesced in the intellectually reductive and imaginatively impoverishing lure of rationalism or scientism, Midgley offered an

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<sup>76</sup> As suggested, for example, by Basil Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (London: Macmillan, 1973).

<sup>77</sup> William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1921), p. 279. Midgley highlights the importance of the passage in which this phrase is located, citing it *in extenso* in her *Owl of Minerva*, pp. 121–2.

<sup>78</sup> Michael R. Slater, *William James on Ethics and Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 69–94, especially 71–2.

increasingly bold defense of philosophy in particular, and of the arts and humanities in general, which is easily and legitimately extended to theology. This paper has offered a critical yet sympathetic account of Midgley's ideas as they bear upon theological issues, as well as a few pointers towards future discussions which might benefit from her critical insights. There is much more that can profitably be said on these matters.